

Learning the hard way: Alcohol abuse shatters lives

Editor's note: The following are personal accounts from RAF Lakenheath people who've been involved in alcohol-related incidents.

All those incidents that you hear about could never happen to me. I'm too 'in control' for anything like that to happen to me as a result of drinking.

These are a couple of things I remember telling myself after being briefed about someone falling victim to the effects of alcohol abuse. Unfortunately, it took a life-threatening incident to happen to me before I wised up.

I started the night off like many other weekend nights. I was going to have a good time and get drunk. I had a couple drinks here and a few there, but instead of stopping at a reasonable level of intoxication, I kept partying until I became uncontrollable and

dangerous. I began to wrestle with a good friend of mine and as a result, we fell over a second-floor balcony. We weren't hurt badly, but we could have been killed.

It took this near-death experience and three days of alcohol-awareness training for me to realize that anyone can fall victim to the affects of alcohol abuse, no matter how tough they think they are.

Remember to drink responsibly. I will never forget.

May 4, 1996, I was a staff sergeant with a good career behind me and a great future ahead. I had just hit my 10-year mark and was sure I would be in for another 10 or more. My ambition was to someday be a first sergeant or even a senior enlisted advisor and to retire just like my father. All that changed at 4 a.m., May 5, when

two British police officers responded to a call about a car with a flat tire.

The night of the fourth, a group of friends and I went out for a meal in Cambridge and some of us planned to make a late evening of it. I knew that drinking and driving don't mix and was going to take all the necessary steps: designated driver, a place to stay, etc. We left about 2 a.m. and we were on our way, the designated driver in charge of the wheel.

Two hours later, I decided that I was only a few miles from home and could handle the drive. That was the greatest mistake of my life.

Less than five miles from my front door, I dozed off for a second and ran over something that flattened my tire. I had to stop by the side of the road. The police showed up shortly after and brought out their breathalyzer.

"I feel fine, I just ran over something!" was my response. I was tired, yes, but drunk? No way!

But the machine didn't lie. I was over the legal limit. By how much isn't as important as the fact that I was driving under the influence.

I found out the difference between being drunk and exceeding legal limits. Being too impaired to operate a vehicle properly is the key. Every time you drive with even one drink under your belt, you are carrying a loaded weapon. I think every day of what would have happened if I hadn't been alone on the road. Who could I have hurt or killed?

After an administrative demotion to senior airman, I am ineligible for promotion and reenlistment. The damage to my military career is permanent, but my life will go on after I leave the Air Force. The knowledge of having pointed a loaded gun at myself and anyone else who might have been on the road will be with me for life. I've never lost a loved one to a drunk driver and I thank God that no one else died because of me.

I am a technical sergeant with 17 years service, I have been married for 15 years and have three children. My decision to be stationed here unaccompanied is in the best interest of my family. The transition to a bachelor type lifestyle has not been easy, having to develop a second house hold that is functional has been a trying experience. The holidays have become a time that is hard to enjoy alone when your family is so far away.

Consuming alcohol has always been a social event, where my wife and I would make the decision as to which one of us would drive before going out and partaking in a night of dancing or socializing with friends. The stresses of day to day life have now been compounded by poor judgment on my part.

The day after Thanksgiving is a day that I will always regret. I made a decision to go to a club where I could be in the presence of other people. Knowing that I would be driving I tried to concentrate on not consuming more than

the legal limit. In the past I had made use of taxis and designated drivers when I knew I had consumed more than the legal limit for driving. This time was different. I felt like I had paced my drinking and that I would be good to go. I felt clear headed and in full control. When I decided to leave I stopped, counted the numbers of drinks I had and decided that I should be well within the limits of the law. Well, I was wrong. I got a DWI that night.

Thinking back on it now with hind sight being 20/20, I realize that there is no such thing as drinking responsibly and driving. Even after the first drink there are changes to the body that has an effect on judgment and good decision making. I was lucky that there was no personal injury, or property damage in my situation. Often times there is property damage, personal injury and, in the worst cases, death. Driving a vehicle after drinking or taking medication that can make you drowsy is a decision that should never be made by any individual. Every military installation has programs that give us the option not to drive when the mind is impaired. Learn what programs are available to you and make use of them any time you have consumed spirits or medication.

Price of drunkenness

The following administrative punishments were issued to RAF Lakenheath members in 1996 due to alcohol-related offenses.

- ☐ 26 Letters of Reprimand and/or Unfavorable Information Files
- ☐ 21 reductions in grade
- ☐ 23 Article 15s
- ☐ 543 days extra duty
- ☐ 2 impending administrative discharges
- ☐ 2 Control Rosters

You don't have to be drunk to get out, have a good time

By Col. Larry Brough
48th Support Group commander

I've been called a party animal many times during my life. I enjoy going to parties and always have a great time. But I don't drink alcohol - never have, never will. I know I can have fun without getting drunk.

Whenever I go to parties, I participate. I join in the fun, whoop it up, get down and do some serious dancing. But I quench my thirst with nonalcoholic beverages. When it's time to go

home, I can drive my car without the concern of getting caught for being drunk or "over the limit." I can actually find my way home on the first try. When I wake up the next morning, I don't have a hangover and I can remember the great time I had the previous night.

For those of you who do enjoy drinking, I encourage you to do so with responsibility and moderation. Alcohol isn't a problem - alcohol abuse is. I can't think of one good reason to overindulge and get drunk. I can think of many good reasons to stay sober - my family, my friends, my career and my life.

Top ten reasons not to abuse alcohol

By Col. Larry Brough
48th Support Group commander

Brought to you from the 48th Support Group headquarters office.

10. You won't "accidentally" steal 56 compact discs, get an Article 15, lose \$1500, get 45 days of extra duty and a suspended bust. (Happened at RAF Lakenheath in January 1997)

9. You won't show up to work intoxicated and receive an Article 15, a reduction in grade and 25 days extra duty. (Happened at RAF Lakenheath in August 1996)

8. You won't have to clean up the vomit in your bed, on your floor and in your bathroom. (Happens every Saturday and Sunday morning here)

7. You won't assault your friend, spouse, or child. (Happens at RAF Lakenheath three to four times a month)

6. Your first sergeant won't have to find you because you forgot to pick up your children. (Happened at RAF Lakenheath in August 1996)

5. You won't get convicted for rape, drunk driving, communicating a threat and be sentenced to seven years in prison, a dishonorable discharge and reduction to airman basic. (Happened at RAF Lakenheath in June 1996 and November 1996)

4. You won't get fined £535 and lose your driving privileges for two years when you are convicted for a DUI. (Happened at RAF Lakenheath in January 1997)

3. You won't fall off your dormitory balcony and spend several months recuperating from injuries. (Happened at RAF Lakenheath in August 1996, January 1997 and February 1997 - three separate instances)

2. You won't kill an innocent child, your spouse, your fiancée, your best friend or a stranger. (Happens every day around the world)

1. You will control your own destiny, arrive home safely and live another day.

Alcohol effects both mind, body

By Dr. (Maj.) J. Mark West
Substance abuse rehabilitation chief

Most people who drink are not alcoholics or even problem drinkers; but many people experience negative consequences as a result of drinking.

At the substance abuse rehabilitation clinic we evaluate and assess most everyone involved in an alcohol-related incident, and for many of the people we've seen, drinking has caused a lot of hurt through physical injury, loss of military status and hurting others.

Some of the more common negative consequences related to drinking "too much" include personal health problems, drunk-driving arrests and crashes, family problems, decreased work performance and endangering personal safety as well as the safety of others.

Ethyl alcohol, or ethanol, is the active chemical ingredient in distilled spirits, wine and beer. Ethanol is a depressant drug with strong addiction potential that produces mind-altering effects, including a "high" feeling, a feeling of reduced stress and tension and impairment of an individual's usual good judgment.

Many of the referrals we receive at the clinic are a result of people drinking too much, too fast and then taking risks. Some of those risks include driving their cars while under the influence, confronting emotional interpersonal-relationship issues,

performing physically dangerous acts and allowing themselves to get into promiscuous circumstances. Many of these events have led to severe, negative consequences both for the person and for those around them. For most of us in the military, alcohol abuse begins to hurt socially, occupationally, and spiritually before it begins to take a heavy toll on our bodies.

In the short term, alcohol depresses the central nervous system. At low blood-alcohol levels, vision, judgment, and complex motor skills are impaired. As the blood-alcohol level increases, simple motor skills and behavior are also impaired. This explains why it is so dangerous to drink and drive. Not only is a person under the influence of alcohol unable to perform the many complex tasks involved in safe driving, he or she cannot judge his or her own level of impairment. A person under the influence may also appear to be more active and talkative, not because alcohol is a stimulant, but because it decreases inhibitions. People may do things when under the influence that normally they would not do.

In the long term, continuous drinking of large quantities of alcohol can cause cirrhosis of the liver and serious nervous and mental disorders, including permanent brain damage. Ulcers, heart disease, gastritis, pancreatitis, diabetes, malnutrition, and some cancers are also more common among chronic heavy drinkers than among the general population.

To reduce or eliminate the risk of alcohol causing hurt, people must accept the fact that it is right not to drink at all at times, and at other times we must drink responsibly when we choose to drink. Not drinking at all is a must when:

- ☐ Driving a motor vehicle.
- ☐ Taking medications.
- ☐ Extremely stressed or tired.
- ☐ Recovering from alcoholism.
- ☐ Expecting, nursing, or considering pregnancy.
- ☐ When it violates your personal values.

Drinking responsibly is probably an overused phrase and seems to carry different meanings to different people. I can only say from a health standpoint, if you choose to drink, experts say exceeding two drinks a day increases the risk for experiencing a variety of health problems including hypertension, cirrhosis and some types of cancer. Further, drinking more than three or four drinks per day significantly increases the risk of developing an alcohol-abuse disorder or alcoholism.

For many people, alcohol is consumed in a responsible, recreational fashion as a secondary event in a primary social setting. Most alcohol abuse occurs when it is used as a primary event or to achieve an effect. It is important to remember that alcohol is a toxin and all use involves some risk.

We all need to pay attention to the drinking choices we make in order to reduce our risk of experiencing alcohol-related problems.